

Villanovans for Life Symposium Sept 30, 2010

The most famous mathematics textbook of all time, Euclid's Elements, begins with five fundamental axioms and a list of precise definitions from which we derive a vast array of mathematical truths. My pro-life convictions also follow from a short list of fundamental axioms.

First axiom: God created us, and we are not the sole masters of our life.

My friends and relatives who support abortion are correct when they say that I have no right to tell a woman what to do with her body. I have no rights over her body, and neither does she. You cannot do with your body what you please.

Second axiom: God created us, and his goal is not to maximize our personal pleasures and to minimize our potential sufferings.

Dr. C. Everett Koop, former Surgeon General of the United States and tireless pro-life advocate, pointed out a few decades ago that, if I am the sole master of my life, then I have the right to assisted suicide. He also said that if our goal is maximizing pleasure and minimizing suffering, then euthanasia of disabled children who cannot live a physically and emotionally fulfilling life is mandatory.

Third axiom: God creates the genetic plan of development at conception.

Eight years ago I was given a sabbatical to study bioinformatics. I enjoyed the math, but was overwhelmed by the genetics and biology I needed to learn. In plant genetics, we studied in detail how the genes and epigenetic histone bindings turn on and off throughout the earliest development of the proto-seed. The genome of the gamete controls its development relatively independently of the mother plant, and the cascade of developmental genes turning on and off, up and down, continues into full maturity. My friends supporting abortion ask: is a fetus fully human? I ask: is a toddler fully human, since genetically their development also has many more changes to make until adulthood? Physical development is based on profound differences in gene expression, but not in the changes to the genome itself. Conception defines a genetically distinct and well defined individual.

Fourth axiom: God declares that children are a blessing, not a curse.

We all love children, but some children do seem cursed. I have several friends with severely handicapped children, and clearly the parents suffer emotional and physical and financial pain. I have seen too many marriages stretched the breaking point by the demands of disabled children.

Dr. Martin Kleiber just retired from our math department. Many of you might recognize him, because he is blind and uses a white cane to get around campus. Dr. Kleiber has spent countless hours protesting at various abortion clinics, because he is acutely aware that, historically, the status of handicapped children has not been one of support but one of abandonment. Dr. Kleiber has personally, without compensation, directed independent studies for students with documented math dyscalculia. Whether the handicap is physical or academic, Dr. Kleiber refuses to say that the disability is not worth overcoming; he works hard to support those with needs.

Fifth axiom: God is love and commands us to love.

My mother worked at a state hospital for the mentally handicapped. One of her favorite patients was a microcephalic, who looked to me to be the definition of a vegetable. He had no responses, although my mother claimed he would move his eyes slightly when she talked to him. When he was twelve years old, a nurse was careless, and he died. My mother grieved his loss, the loss of a "vegetable" with no quality of life by any reasonable standard, except by the standard of love. In reality, my pro-life position is consistent with axiomatic reasoning but not ultimately based on formal reason. My mother's unconditional love for a "vegetable" is why I am pro-life.